

Saturday Night

Fall literary issue

\$1

November 1975

Fact & fiction:
9 writers on
"real" people
in literature

"Do you use real people in your fiction?" You can't write stories and novels very long without hearing that question. The nine writers below tell us how they deal with it. Also in our literary section: profiles of poet Susan Musgrave and man-of-letters Lovat Dickson.

At Simon Fraser University the knives are out for Pauline Jewett. The former MP and political scientist has discovered herself in the middle of a political battle that again raises an important issue: should our universities be dominated by Canadians or Americans?

Masters of naïve art: across Canada artists are expressing themselves through forms rooted in everyday experience. A nine-page colour section presents the work of Ernest Gendron of Québec, Joe Fafard of Saskatchewan, David Gilhooly of Ontario, and Arch Williams of Newfoundland.



This Month

The problem of real people in fiction

Margaret Drury Gane is a fiction writer whose work has often been published in *Chatelaine* and who recently finished her first novel, *Shirley Upshaw*. She discovered, when she first began to write published work a few years ago, that at least some people—including members of her family—chose



to regard the people in her fictions as portraits of actual living (or recently dead) persons. She began to wonder whether other and better established writers had the same problem. She wrote to a number of them to find out, and their replies—along with Mrs. Gane's introduction—may be found on page thirty-nine under the title "Do you use real people in your fiction?" It serves as the centrepiece for our annual November literary issue.

Mrs. Gane, by the way, has written a short story which will appear soon in *Saturday Night*. Whether it deals with actual living persons is a question she declines for the moment to discuss. "If I'm an embarrassment to the family because of things I write—which I must be at times—I accept it as one of the hazards of the work." Perhaps someone will soon be interviewing *her* on the subject.

“Do you use real people in your fiction?”

It's impossible to write novels or stories without hearing that question. We asked some eminent authors how they deal with it. Here are their replies, suitably hedged

by Margaret Drury Gane

“Writing is like cutting yourself in two—one half trying to live, the other half watching, weighing. I think other people never forgive it.”

Gabrielle Roy made that pessimistic observation in her novel, *The Street of Riches*, written when she was just sixteen. Although it is spoken by the mother to Roy's obvious alter-ego, Christine, it is clearly the young author warning herself: if you choose to become a writer, be prepared for the artistic schizophrenia that will make you one-half human, one-half notebook, a condition no one else is going to like. With amazing precocity, Roy was predicting in fiction what she felt was fact in life. Much later, and from the vantage point of greater age and vast personal trial, Graham Greene looked back to make a similar

statement. Claiming that all authors have a sliver of ice through the heart, he admitted to making cool mental notes for future use in his work, even while he suffered at his father's funeral. Greene didn't make an assessment of the result, but Gabrielle Roy did—by adding that small, spare sentence with its haunting tombstone quality: I think other people never forgive it.

Greene's blunt self-appraisal and Roy's moody foreboding raise some interesting questions. What is it that other people never forgive? Who are these other people? It seems unlikely that either Greene or Roy are referring to their reading public: writers write for this anonymous mass, and Marian Engel's declaration that she thinks readers tend to see more truth in fiction than they do in straight journalism echoes the

feelings of most fiction writers. Still, if that is a fault, it can often work in an author's favour, titillating enough public curiosity to boost a book's sales even if the critics have panned it as trash. Who, then, do we have left? People close to the author—family, friends, relatives—the insiders who may share solid, first-hand knowledge. They are the people who know what the canny public has always suspected: that a lot of fact goes into all that fiction. It is this that makes the family so vulnerable, and the author among them an embarrassment.

Not in the beginning, of course. The emergence of a budding writer from a covey of nice normal kids can be met with everything from mild puzzlement to proud awe, depending on the family. If the writer in the child matures and eventually publishes,

excitement is boundless. Phones leap to life as the news is passed through the family, some of whom are certain that this success flowed from their latently creative chromosomes. Culling the published story for something, someone they'll recognize, they discover an eccentric aunt, the author's former boss who boozed from nine till five, a shrewish supermom who used to live down the street.

And they are right. Admonished to keep to the territory he knows, to write about people and events in his own experience, the writer gives those closest their first meal of fact, breaded in fiction. Not long after, family pride becomes subtly laced with apprehension, the scramble to take some credit for the creative juices dies away. Nobody wants responsibility for *those* genes. Why has this happened? Because somewhere in all that hilarious unearthing of the familiar, the thought has struck: if he'll use *them*, am I next? What will he reveal about our relationship? Revelation, no matter how thinly disguised or swaddled in rhetoric—even if it is totally changed by the writer—is unforgivable. My-child-the-writer has become my-child-the-threat.

Maybe writers should catch the clues floating by at the beginning of a career. When a piece of short fiction is referred to as "an article," the journalistic term. When, as in Margaret Atwood's case, she has to explain that her parents are alive, not dead, like the parents in *Surfacing*. When people ask if you really did attend a private school because "everything was so authentic," a reaction I experienced to a short story. (In fact, I went to public schools and lived on the poor side of the tracks.) It seems that nobody really believes that disclaimer printed on most novels: all charac-

ters and events are fictitious; any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely co-incidental. If people believed that, there wouldn't be so many writers caught in the dilemma of personal hassles directly related to their work—the part that deals with what they have written, the people they describe, the situations authors say are "explored" and families feel have been exploited.

Explicit love scenes may cause the marriage partner to ask where all the research is being done, since their own love life is blah. Pleading imagination, the author could be caught in a double-bind: is that what you're thinking about when you're so silent? Especially since the advent of the women's liberation movement, women who write openly about failed hopes and frustration have had a hard time pacifying shocked parents and stunned husbands. Men in positions of status can get very nervous when views the writing wife holds are published for colleagues to read. Fine in the kitchen, but don't broadcast it, okay? No matter how liberated he thinks he is, her thoughts and words—he feels—somehow emanate from him and reflect on him.

There is so much precedent behind this instinct to believe that fiction truly mirrors the author's experience that no one can be blamed for the suspicion. *Roman à clef*—the use of real people in fictitious guise—has been around since people began printing. Somerset Maugham is alleged to have effectively ruined Hugh Walpole's high-flying career when he used him as the model for the fawning, hypocritical writer in *Cakes and Ale*. Maugham disavowed this, but later investigation reveals it as an accurate, unmistakable portrait; Walpole was possibly damned as much by the reality of those horrible char-

acteristics as he was by Maugham's use of them. Lovable, chuckly old Stephen Leacock put Orillia on the map as the Sunshine Town, but permanently alienated the residents at the time. They saw him as an opportunistic, slyly heartless man who sneered at them behind their backs and used them as objects of ridicule. Maybe that's why Hugh Garner, having answered all the questions I put to him, advised: "Don't get too chummy with writers, or some day you'll regret it." Also, he could have been thinking of the spate of "key" books on the market that explain who so-and-so *was* in a certain novel.

Maybe, to avoid the flak, writers should be orphaned, unmarried loners, sentenced periodically to a minimum-security prison where they could write what they like without interruption or personal explanation. Or take to writing about symbolic bunny populations, like Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, that nobody can mistake for the writer's relatives.

But writers haven't those options. Of all the myths built up around them—introspective, shy, terrible-tempered, mysterious, lonely—the only common quality that has some substance is their drive to write. The urge (in Frank O'Connor's words) to fashion "a story so lifelike that it is able to get up and walk away" overrides all other considerations. The melancholy in Gabrielle Roy's and Graham Greene's observations suggests that, in the end, the notebook always wins.

As a fiction writer I've encountered some of these problems. I wanted to find out how other writers have dealt with them, or not dealt with them, and I wrote to a number of writers to ask for their views. Their replies are printed here.



Alice Munro

I really don't know where I stand on all this—use of “real” people, etc. Mostly I use composites, but I have used real people in a few stories. I have used lots of real incidents with the characters and settings changed around. I have tried, when using “real” people, to make it clear that they are seen through one particular faulty vision—mine. I have tried to write about myself seeing them, as well as about them. This to me seems to make the undertaking less dishonourable. Fiction seems to me such a serious adventure I will do almost anything it requires—entirely forgetting about the audience and consequences. I don't agree about the sliver of ice, if that means the writer doesn't “feel.” Writing seems to me an attempt to deal with feelings so strong they couldn't otherwise be borne. Graham Greene noticing all the details at his father's funeral—that seems to me proof of pain, not its opposite.

I don't think families and friends have any obligation at all to understand the writer in their midst. As a matter of fact, I don't think I'd care for a writer in my midst. If they love you, they'll know you work and use things out of faith and necessity, not for diversion, and you can thank them for that.

Robertson Davies

I have never felt any impulse to portray a living person in a book that I was writing, although many people have attempted to identify characters in books that I have written. I think that it



would be cruel to pillory a living person in a book and nothing would induce me to do so because, quite apart from the cruelty, I feel that it is bad art. A novel must have unity and it cannot be fully unified if living people and imaginary people are mixed up indiscriminately. Even the intensely personal writing of Marcel Proust does not lend itself to the kind of identification you are speaking about because Proust is too great an artist to tolerate such easy writing—what would, in fact, be a combination of fiction and reporting. A first-class writer might unwittingly put a character in a book who could, in some ways, be identified with a living person, but I gravely doubt if he would do so intentionally.

Marian Engel

The public does not know fact from fiction. Recently a woman said to me, “I'm from Sarnia too and I loved that story about you running your mum down on her bicycle.” That was a story. My mother doesn't ride a bike and I don't drive. Everything has to be autobiography, nobody understands about *personae*. One of my nephews read a novel of mine and said “ya balled my dad.” He meant, the heroine had an affair with her brother-in-law.

I feel badly when everyone thinks I knocked my ma off her bicycle and she feels profoundly embarrassed. My poor brother-in-law has got over the shock, chiefly since the brother-in-law in the book bore no resemblance, but I do find the family, knowing I have used fragments of their histories, sometimes think they are the subject of my work.



Bits of them are, of course. I tell them to take what they want, the nice parts. I don't know if they do. Haven't time to worry. Friends don't seem to recognize themselves. One must only use one's illiterate friends, I suppose.

I think you just have to bash on and say the hell with it. As long as you're not setting out intentionally to crucify people. I had a friend, however, who was made the pilloried hero of a whole novel (in the U.S.) by a graduate student he drank with and told his troubles to. He was furious: his whole life was laid out. I sympathized. I've never done that except in a couple of short stories. The people I've used haven't seemed to mind, but then I've tended to avoid them afterwards so have no intention of repeating the experience.

The line between responsibilities to one's friends and responsibilities to use what one knows of their lives for the enlightenment of the public can't be drawn. I prefer on the whole to make people up out of snippets of past histories of many people. It's safer and no one person is a novel. I know, however, that I use my own family here and there and it embarrasses them. Well, they can write their own novels and use me if it gets too bad. But honestly, I think by the time a person has passed through your consciousness and then through the necessities of the fiction you are creating there isn't much literal truth left. Laddie in *Monodromos* is a composite of at least four people and really, now, himself. I've never known him.

I think it's okay to do vignettes of people you adore. The tailor, Pambos, was real in that book and so was Lyle in *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, and why not? They were wonderful.



Joyce Carol Oates

"Characters" in fiction may be suggested by one's impression of actual people (rather than the people themselves: we really don't know most people except from the outside), but I think it is more common, at least in my experience, for them to evolve gradually out of the imagination. They grow, in a sense, into consciousness; they cannot be invented. All creative processes are rather mysterious, and the birth of literary characters defies exact explanation. (Some writers, of course, work with thinly disguised personalities, but I don't think most serious writers would find this rewarding ultimately.)

My parents are present very deliberately in my novel *Wonderland*, on page 191 in the hardcover edition; in fact, I am also present, as a child. I might have done this to specifically indicate my attitude toward them so that it could not be "read into" other works. I have not written about other relatives, and probably will not.

Margaret Atwood

It's a strange area. I think in Canada, especially, the audience very much wants to believe that the central character in a novel is the author and that everything happened just the way it says in the book. How many people have asked me whether I've ever stopped eating (as in *Edible Woman*) or whether my parents are dead (as in *Surfacing*; they aren't). The odd thing is that when you tell people, no, this never



happened, this person isn't me, they feel cheated... as though you've pulled a conjuring trick on them. This seems to attach itself only to the "serious" novel (no one ever asks Agatha Christie whether she's a male Belgian detective or whether she's murdered fifty people).

I've never had anyone accuse me of using *them*, though I've had third parties accuse me of using some second party or other. I guess I believe that fiction is fiction and that if I were writing autobiography I'd label it as such.

Ethics? One ought not to use the true names and *personae* of real living people in fiction. It is too damaging to them. Exceptions would be walk-on parts by institutional personages, glimpsed in the distance as part of a social background (i.e. seeing the Queen go past in a parade). If real people choose to identify themselves as otherwise-named fictional characters, that's another problem. And that happens all the time. It's not unusual for an author to be accused of "using" some person he or she has never met before.

Harry J. Boyle

The worlds of fiction and fact are distinct. Readers have a tendency to associate a fiction author with a principal character, especially in a first person book. I've found this, strangely enough, to be true more often in a novel than even in semi-autobiographical books of essays.

There's an exception to that. In one case I was autographing books in London, Ontario, and a school principal came up to me and said he had taken an



earlier book home the previous Christmas to his brother who remained on the family farm. It was near St. Augustine, Huron County, where I grew up.

"We spent all Christmas holidays," he said, "going through that book picking out the different characters." Then he reeled off the questions. Was this so and so?

The truth is he came close, as close as could be, because the characters are not of whole cloth. You add a bit and take away a bit. I've had letters from as distant as Edinburgh and the American southwest saying I must have written about their neighbours. I'm flattered in western Canada to be introduced as a westerner. Rural people say they recognize neighbours and situations, and ask me which of the Prairie provinces I lived in.

Readers use their own imaginations and fix an idea of the characters. They seem to ignore the setting. It is true, of course, a fact that people who live on the land, no matter where they live, do have many similar characteristics.

My mother related a story a few years ago when I was visiting her and my sister said, "Oh ma, be careful or he'll have it in one of those stories of his." My family are of Irish extraction and storytelling is part of their way of life, so they understand the art and I would be surprised at misreading.

I've disguised incidents on rare occasions because I didn't want to hurt someone, but as I said, rarely.

There were two reactions from interviewers about *The Great Canadian Novel*. One was to ask if I was Shane Donovan. The second one was a shock.



A great many interviewers actively suggested I was writing about them.

There has been a flow of recent fiction in which it appears that well-known characters are used in disguise. The authors in these cases may be simply capitalizing on public interest in well-known figures. Some of these efforts appear to be constructed rather than written.

A problem for new writers is to write of a genre different than that of their families. That's where the shock comes. A writer may have grown up in isolation in a deeply religious atmosphere or in a circle with deep cultural or even ethnic relationships. His experience is in a different environment and circumstance and he must be prepared that some people who remain fixed will take umbrage at the world of his creation.

Fiction is creation. Creation is mysterious and man has been puzzling over the subject for a very long time.

Brian Moore

Because my wife is Nova Scotian and beautiful many people assumed that she is Mary Dunne in *I Am Mary Dunne*. She is not, of course. Otherwise the only adverse reaction to the book was from reviewers (male) who complained that I was doing something unnatural. One reviewer, Evan Connell, in the *New York Times*, said something about it being like a drag impersonation. Female reviewers seemed to like the book and were not critical of my method.

I've often thought how interesting it would be to see what would happen



to this book were it to appear today under a feminine pseudonym. I like to think that it would at once enter the canon of the women's liberation novels.

All characters are inventions. If the author keeps this in mind, he or she will have no guilts. If I were to write about a real character it would be fact, not fiction. The act of writing a novel inevitably alters facts and events and personalities. I can, with a clear conscience, turn to anyone who might challenge me (no one has) and answer: "This is not you."

Hugh Garner

The best way to avoid getting flak from family, neighbours, and friends is not to tell them you are a writer; let them discover it for themselves. I have been chewed out many times, especially during the 1950s, for pieces of journalism I wrote (400 articles between 1952 and 1961), by Roman Catholic archbishops, members of the federal and provincial cabinets, presidents of business firms (especially the service trades) for things I said about them, their business, trade, profession, or cherished beliefs. Let them get it off their chest, always write a courteous reply, and to hell with them.

I agree wholeheartedly with Graham Greene. Every writer depends on his senses and memory of many, many occasions in his own life. This is an essential part of a writer's trade.

I have never consciously copped out of using as a character in a novel or short story somebody I knew and on whom the character was based.



Strangely, most people refuse to recognize themselves when they become the prototype of a bad, vicious, or unlikeable character in a work of fiction. The only person who ever wrote to me and accused me of using her in a short story was a former woman neighbour whom I used as the trollop in a short story called "Lucy." She hadn't connected herself with the character in the story, but her sister did, and told her. I used a former acquaintance in one of my novels, and drew him as a stupid, opportunistic clot. I have seen him once or twice since, but he failed to recognize himself in the book. Not so strangely; he actually is a stupid, opportunistic clot, a guy who became a minister because he had neither the education nor moxy to be anything else.

I have never regretted writing *anything*, whether it received an adverse reaction either personal, public, or critical.

I have resolved any conflict, real or imaginary, I might ever have had regarding writing freely and honestly, by doing just that. I owe nothing, and have no responsibilities to, anyone other than myself and my readers.

P.S. Don't get too chummy with other writers, or some day you'll regret it.

Eric Nicol

I have had very little umbrage taken by relatives or strangers, mostly because I direct most of the ridicule at either myself or society as a whole. I try to be careful where I throw the banana skin. ☉